

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Construction of New Visitor Facilities in the Entrance Area Denali National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates specific facility site locations and use in the entrance area of Denali National Park and Preserve (Denali) for development authorized by the 1997 Record of Decision for the *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan* (DCP/EIS). The entrance area developments are limited to actions in which the NPS has traditionally specialized, such as interpretive centers, environmental education opportunities, trails, resource protection programs, and campgrounds.

The NPS preferred alternative includes developing a visitor center, depot improvements, science and learning center, rerouting utility corridors, trails and fueling site in the entrance area as described below.

- A new 14,500-sq. ft. visitor center, including a new theater seating between 275-300 people, will be built adjacent to the former hotel site along with a food court and sales facility in a plaza configuration. Space at the plaza will be set aside for an art gallery to be added later. The park road will be re-routed to allow the visitor center pedestrian plaza to connect to an expanded Alaska Railroad depot. Improvements at the depot will also include additional parking space and improved vehicle and pedestrian circulation.
- The new Denali Science and Learning Center (DSLCL) will be constructed north of the visitor center to facilitate research, serve school groups, individuals and other groups with programs beginning in 2004. The education building will also serve as a winter visitor contact station for the park..
- A new site and access road on the western side of the bus parking lot will replace the existing fueling site. The new fueling site will accommodate tanks, piping, and related structures for unleaded gas, diesel, bio-diesel, and liquefied natural gas.
- New trails will be constructed in the entrance area, including a cultural resources trail, re-route of the Rock Creek and Triple Lakes Trails, and re-routes of trails through the former hotel site.
- Entrance area utility corridors will be re-routed to serve the new destinations. Some concession functions will be housed in temporary facilities until new facilities are completed. The 60-site Morino Campground will close after the summer 2002 season.
- Logistics functions such as bus ticketing, campground reservations, backcountry reservations and general information will remain at the Visitor Access Center (VAC).
- The post office will be moved temporarily to a previously disturbed site, and will then move to a site adjacent to the Riley Creek Mercantile.

The primary objectives of the preferred alternative are to provide over 90% of park visitors with opportunities for resource-based experiences in the entrance area of Denali as well as to establish a quality science and learning center for those visitors participating in extended educational programs. Other objectives are to improve vehicle and pedestrian circulation, provide a safe environment for visitors traveling to and from the railroad depot, minimize new disturbance by fully utilizing the disturbed ground under the recently closed park hotel, and to evaluate the development required under the new principal park concession contract.

The NPS preferred alternative was identified as the environmentally preferred alternative in the EA. Even though the No-Action Alternative directly affects the least wildlife habitat and vegetation acreage, the long-term park resource protection goals will be best ensured by facilitating resource-based opportunities for visitors and by providing a quality in-park research and education programs.

Alternatives

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA, in addition to the NPS preferred alternative. Briefly, those alternatives were:

Alternative 2 (Implement Previously Approved Entrance Area Plans) combines development actions approved in three previous public planning and compliance documents: The 1994 Visitor Transportation System EA, the 1996 DCP/EIS, and the 1999 Depot EA. Under these plans:

The existing VAC site would be expanded into a visitor center campus, with the VAC converted to a traditional visitor center and logistics and service functions such as ticketing, campground reservations, backcountry reservations, and food service moved to a new visitor services building adjacent to the expanded visitor center. A new 250 vehicle parking lot would be constructed southeast of the existing VAC parking lot.

Some of the buildings at the hotel site, including the auditorium, would be adaptively used for a DSLC. Concession employee facilities would be upgraded.

The railroad depot facilities would be changed in a plan similar to the Preferred Alternative. An 1,800-foot long realignment of the park road parallel to the site would provide room for the expanded parking and circulation serving an expanded depot.

New trails would be constructed in the entrance area, including a proposed cultural resources trail and re-routes of the Rock Creek and Triple Lakes Trails.

The post office would be moved to a site adjacent to the Riley Creek Mercantile

The 60-site Morino Campground would remain open for visitors without vehicles.

Alternative 3 - Existing Conditions (No Action Alternative) represents the status quo and serves as a benchmark from which to measure adverse or beneficial impacts of the action alternatives. Under this alternative:

The park's bus systems, store, reservations and bus and campground ticketing, and some other functions are operated under a concessions contract, with existing concessioner employee housing continuing. Harrison Hall would remain as the dining facility for the concessioner's employees. The hotel auditorium would be available for interpretive programs. The park hotel closed after the 2001 season.

Logistics functions such as bus ticketing, campground reservations, backcountry reservations and general information would remain at the Visitor Access Center (VAC). There would be no visitor center for in-depth information and programs. There would be no environmental education/science center established in the park for expanded learning and research programs.

The 60-site Morino walk-in campground would remain open. No new trails would be constructed in the entrance area, including a proposed cultural resources trail, re-route of the Rock Creek Trail, and re-route of the northern mile of the Triple Lakes Trail.

The Alaska Railroad could construct new facilities such as passenger shelters and a depot on their 200-foot wide exclusive use easement. The post office could remain at its present location or could be removed temporarily to a previously disturbed site.

Public Involvement

Public review of the EA was conducted from December 6, 2001 to January 15, 2002. Open Houses were held in Anchorage on December 6, in Fairbanks on December 10, and in Healy on December 12. Two comment letters were received on the EA, and one recommendation was taken over the phone. The State of Alaska fully supported the project but requested a clarification as to the net impacts to air quality from the use of less polluting fuels in buses. Denali National Park and Preserve will participate in an Air Pollution Emission Inventory during 2002 to determine the magnitude of in-park emissions and to identify existing and potential strategies to mitigate in-park emissions. The inventory will further provide a good baseline of data from which to measure proposals that would impact Denali's Class 1 airshed.

The National Parks and Conservation Association supported the preferred alternative with the stipulation that sufficient room be set aside to allow a future move of the VAC functions to the visitor center vicinity. The logistics functions will remain at the VAC under this plan because there is not room at the visitor center site to accommodate the vehicle parking available at the VAC. Future changes in technology or vehicle use may allow these functions to be located at the visitor center site.

One individual suggested that the visitor facilities would be better located at the end of a proposed rail line to the interior of the park, but this would not meet objectives for visitor education at the park entrance and is outside the scope of this analysis.

Mitigation and Monitoring

The mitigation and monitoring measures listed in the EA as part of the action alternatives and assumed in the analysis of effects will be implemented as part of this decision. They deal with vegetation, water, wetlands, wildlife, visual and cultural resources, as well as visitor use and safety, and are attached as Appendix 1 of this document..

Environmental Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

The NPS has determined that the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to the natural or cultural resources as documented by the EA and briefly summarized below.

Up to 13 acres of mixed white spruce and hardwood forest vegetation will be permanently removed and about 3 acres of former hardwood forest will be restored. The vegetation community is locally and regionally common.

The loss of 1.1 acres of *broad-leaved palustrine scrub shrub* and *palustrine needle-leaved forest* wetland resources are not expected to be significant because the wetland type involved is regionally common and the wetland types have low functional value. Restoring degraded wetlands on former placer-mined streams in the Kantishna Hills will compensate for the wetland acres lost. There will be no impacts to floodplains.

A net of up to 10 acres of wildlife habitat will be lost due to the new facilities in this plan. This amount is similar to that anticipated when a decision was made on the DCP/EIS. Impacts to moose calving habitat will decrease relative to the DCP/EIS because the new park road realignment will only disturb higher quality habitat next to an existing road rather than create a new road corridor through the higher quality habitat

Biofiltration swales and other engineered drainage will reduce any impacts from surface runoff to the depot area or to the airstrip.

Recreation opportunities for entrance area visitors will be enhanced by facilities that enable 90% of park visitors to have quality interpretive and educational experiences.

The project area is not within any wilderness proposals. Long-term impacts to visual resources will be minor because new facilities will be constructed mostly where previous hotel facilities existed.

Rationale for the Decision

The NPS preferred alternative is chosen because it best meets the entrance area objectives and does so with similar or fewer impacts to park resources than other action alternatives. Even though the no-action alternative does not disturb new habitat, it does not meet any of the stated objectives. The primary objectives are to provide over 90% of park visitors with opportunities for resource-based experiences in the entrance area of Denali as well as to establish a quality science and learning center for those visitors participating in extended educational programs. Other objectives are to improve vehicle and pedestrian circulation, provide a safe environment for visitors traveling to and from the railroad depot, fully utilize the disturbed ground under the recently closed park hotel, and to evaluate the development required under the new principal park concession contract.

This preferred alternative is consistent with the 1986 Park General Management Plan, the general direction in the 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan/Environmental Impact Statement, and National Park Service Management Policies.

All environmental impacts will be minor at most and, therefore, will not result in an impairment of resources or values of Denali National Park and Preserve and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Water Act, and Executive Orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands). There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

I find that the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Recommended: _____
Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve

Date

Approved: _____
Regional Director, Alaska Region

Date

Appendix 1

Mitigation and Monitoring

Mitigation measures are specific actions that when implemented reduce impacts, protect park resources, and protect visitors. The following mitigation will be implemented as part of this decision:

Vegetation. As part of the restoration process, abandoned roads and other disturbed areas beyond construction footprints within the project area will be restored with native vegetation. Landscaping and replanting native vegetation will occur around the new development area. Replanting with native vegetation will replace portions of the habitat lost from the construction operations. The park will attempt to preserve a small colony of lady's slipper orchids (*Cypripedium guttatum*) in its current location. If this will impede site circulation, cause adverse design constraints or if nearby construction threatens the survival of the orchids, the colony will be carefully transplanted to a suitable location under the oversight of the park's plant ecologist. Periodic surveys will be conducted after construction to determine the presence of exotic plants. Exotics will be controlled.

Water Resources. Measures to reduce surface water run-off and flooding of downhill facilities, including the AKRR Depot and NPS airstrip, will be incorporated into facility design. NPS and AKRR engineers and contractor will work together to determine surface drainage patterns. These patterns will be considered in the design and structure of the access roads, parking lots, and new entrance area facilities.

Wetlands. The Statement of Findings, located in Appendix B of the EA, addresses wetland compensation and mitigation. In summary, a 1.1-acre riparian area on Caribou Creek in the Kantishna Hills region of the park will be restored to provide direct compensation for the low quality wetlands lost in the railroad depot expansion project. Silt fences will protect wetlands in the area not directly affected by construction.

Wildlife and Habitat. The NPS, concessionaire, and contractors will follow established guidelines in the park's bear-human conflict management plan. The plan requires operators to use bear-proof containers for food and refuse and sets up guidelines for temporary closures.

Cultural Resources. Surveys for cultural resources have taken place over the past two decades. One known site (SI91-1) will be documented prior to construction activities. An assessment of effect has been made and the site has been determined to be not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. If previously unknown cultural resources were located during construction, the project will be halted in the discovery area until cultural resource staff could determine the significance of the finding. Additional archeological surveys will be conducted in the area of the proposed project as necessary. Should unknown resources be uncovered during construction, work will be stopped in the project area and the National Park Service will consult according to 36 CFR 800.11 and, as appropriate, provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990.

Visitor Use and Recreation. Construction phasing will be coordinated with the AKRR and the park concessionaire to minimize traffic delays on the park road. Road realignment work will be completed before starting construction on the existing road near the depot. Construction activities creating lengthy traffic delays on the park road will be restricted to periods of low visitor use, such as evenings and during the off-season. Visitor impact is expected, so an educational program with information and interpretive signs will be implemented. Barricades will be placed around the construction sites to prevent visitor entry.

Visual Resources. Vegetative buffers approximately 30 to 40 feet in width will be established or maintained between the Denali Park Road and parking areas and new structures to minimize adverse

visual impacts to park visitors. Parking areas will be broken into smaller parking pods and curved to reduce the overall visual impact. Vegetated islands will be established in larger parking areas. Previously disturbed sites will be vegetated with native materials to provide buffers between roads and new construction.

Safety. Heavy construction will be scheduled either during the off-hours of visitor use or during the shoulder season to reduce hazards to visitors. The park superintendent or authorized delegate may authorize scheduling changes. Work activities that might impact park operations, such as utility shutdowns, will be scheduled during the off hours or during periods of low visitation. Normal construction activity will be limited to daytime hours during the summer season (typically 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days per week).

Visitors will not be allowed in the areas of the former hotel area during active construction without permission from the superintendent or delegate. Service traffic associated with the operation of the dining facility will be the only public or concession allowed vehicles to enter the hotel site.